

JARROT MANSION
CAHOKIA ILLINOIS

St. Clair Co.

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CENTRAL ILLINOIS DISTRICT NO. 25

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
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BLOOMINGTON ILLINOIS

The Nicholas Jarrot Mansion, Cahokia, St. Clair County,
Illinois.

by Otis Winn, Murphysboro, Illinois April 1934

Nicholas Jarrot was born in 1764, in Vesoul, France. He was educated as befitted the son of a highly respectable family. Reynolds in his 'Pioneer History' implies that "troubles in France in 1790 caused Jarrot to emigrate." He first landed in America at Baltimore, and after visiting New Orleans journeyed up the Mississippi river.

First recorded date of purchase of property by Jarrot in Cahokia is 1793. Another purchase of property there by him is as of 1795. It is recorded that he lived in Cahokia since 1796, though he might have and likely did live in Cahokia before this date.

His first marriage was with Marie Barbeau of Prairie du Rocher (recorded date not available in documents). She died a few years later leaving him a daughter, Elsie, who in 1811 married a Dr. Tiffin.

In 1797 he married Julia Beauvais of St. Genevieve, formerly of Kaskaskia, and the daughter of one of the wealthiest and most influential families of the French colony. To Julia came the heritage of the wedding silver ladle, spoons and cups, which had been her mother's Felicite Janis, when she married Vital Beauvais in 1776.

In 1798 the Jarrots^t were living at Cahokia in a wooden house across the street from the "Holy Family Church." Nicholas Jarrot was rapidly accumulating a fortune by trading, and in 1799 began the construction of the mansion which to this day bears his name. The site chosen is just east of the church and the building was completed in 1806. It was the second brick house in the State and the Mississippi Valley. The first was at Kaskaskia. All of the bricks were made on the job. Glass for the windows, much of which is still in place, was shipped from France. No iron nails were used in the construction of the building, but wooden pins were used where necessary.

The house is a two story structure with full basement and attic. It is 33'-4" wide and 51'-0" long and the plan chosen is now considered of the Colonial style. A large Central Hall extends from front to rear (north and south) of the building. Originally there were four rooms on the first floor, two on either side of the Central Hall. Later (date unknown) the two rooms of the west end were converted into one room by the removal of the dividing partition. The building has two exterior doors on the first floor, both off the Central Hall. The front door (north) led to a covered porch having four columns that appear to have been of the Corinthian type. The rear (south) led to a raised platform and was likely protected by some sort of stoop, which has now disappeared.

There is a basement under all of the original building. The basement is divided into three parts, corresponding to the East, Central and West three major divisions of the first floor. A door unites the West and Central basement units. The West unit does not directly communicate with the other units. The West and Central units have exterior doors upon the South side of the building, with stairways on the outside leading up to grade level. Originally the Central unit of this basement was used as the kitchen and food was served by slaves through a hinged panel in the stairway to other slaves, who in turn served the food to the family and guests using the Central Hall of the first floor as the dining room. A slave with a huge fan stood at each end of the Hall to keep the flies from annoying the guests. The basement stairs indicate that the first floor Southwest room might have been used as the family dining room, with the Central Hall used for dining purposes on special occasions. Later, (date unknown) a wing, which is now used as a kitchen, was added on the South and at the East end of the building. This wing is entirely of wood construction. The construction indicates that originally a window was located where the present interior door leading to the kitchen is placed.

The stairs at the rear of the Central Hall lead to the second floor hall which in turn leads to a large ballroom which now extends over the East two-thirds of the front of the second floor. According to Mies Margaret Babbs, "The ballroom

originally extended entirely across the front (north) of the second floor." One large bed room is now located West of the ballroom. There was and is a bedroom on the East and another on the West side of the rear (south) portion of the second floor. Entrance to both of these rooms as well as the ballroom and the stairs leading to the attic is from the stairs leading up from the first floor.

A narrow stair leads from the second floor stair hall to the attic, which was likely used as sleeping quarters for some of the slavee.

According to Miss Margaret Babbs (see publication under references) "This structure rests upon a foundation of black walnut timbers with about two feet exposed above grade and several feet hidden underground. These timbers were embedded in charcoal which was separated from the earth by layers of sand and gravel. Such care in the foundation was necessary for a building whose outside walls are eighteen inches in thickness, and whose interior partitions are also made of brick and are sixteen inches thick. Even the roof was built to endure. It lasted one hundred years."

The building at the present time rests on a foundation of rough stone about two feet in thickness. From all present indications of basement walls; chimney foundations; fireplace in the basement Central unit, where the cooking was originally undoubtedly done; the rough stone basement floor; grade entrances on the South to the Central and West basement units; the care-

fully executed details of the basement doors and windows and the framing of the first floor supporting members, the building must have been built upon its present foundation and not as Miss Babb has stated.

At present the original roof is covered by a present day flat tile roof.

From the planning, throughout the framing to the finish detailing of this building, it gives evidence of superior workmanship and the best of materials. It is a splendid building today and has passed thru at least three earthquakes (those recorded were in 1811, 1812 and 1818), and many floods. In the days when Nicholas and his wife Julia lived here it must have been a marvel to all the people who came to Cahokia. Among those numbered were the Bonds, Shadrook Bond being the first Governor of Illinois; John Reynolds, Governor Ninian Edwards, and perhaps Pierre Menard of Kaskaskia, first Lieutenant Governor. Indeed such was the enviable place of Cahokia in general esteem that there is a tradition in the Jarrot family, St. Louis having no place fine enough in which to entertain La Fayette when he visited America in 1825,- they journeyed over the Mississippi to the Jarrot Mansion for a ball. Francois Jarrot had just attained his majority and with his mother received the distinguished visitor.

Nicholas Jarrot established the first school in Cahokia. Samuel Davidson, a lawyer from Kentucky settled in Cahokia in

1809. Jarrot psrsuaded him to abandon his practice and become a schoolmaster. The salary of four hundred dollars a year was paid by Jarrot and the classes wsre held in the ball-room of his own mansion.

Nicholas and Julia Jarrot had six children. Ortance the oldest was born in 1799; the other children wers Eugenie, Francois, Vital, Julia and Felicite.

Ortance, in 1818 married Robert McCracksn who came from Ireland with his uncle, John Edgar. McCracken died in 1826 and his widow married Dr. James L. Brackett. Marie Brackett, one of her children, married Judge Joseph Sibley in 1849, and from their daughter Julia Miss Babb obtained hsr information concerning the Jarrot family history.

Eugenie, ths sscond child, born in 1801, marrisd Samuel Christie in 1823. There were four children to this marriage.

Francois, born in 1803, did not marry and disd in 1837.

Vital, born in 1805, educated at Gsorgetown Univrsity, served in ths Black Hawk War, was a member of the Illinois Gensral Assembly, part owner of the first railroad in Illinois, published the first newspaper in East St. Louis. Disd in 1877.

Julia, the fifth child, was born in 1807. She married three times. Her husbands were Thomas Short, William Morrison and Dr. Price.

The youngest child was Felicite, born in 1813. Hsr husbands were Mr. Tillman and Charles Waddell. It was customary

to have a young lady take up the collection at the midnight mass on Christmas. Felicite Jarrot was acting as collector the night the parsonage was destroyed by fire.

Nicholas Jarrot owned 25,000 acres of land, including most of present East St. Louis. Living under the shadow of the church, the oldest in Illinois that is still in existence, Nicholas Jarrot's life was an exemplary one. He and Mme. Jarrot always preceded the family procession in going to and from mass on the Sabbath.

Nicholas Jarrot died on Friday, December 8, 1820. His body lay in state in the great Central Hall of his mansion while the ancient bell of the old church nearby tolled his passing to the countryside. He ~~was~~^{is} buried just East of the church in the old burying grounds.

Mme. Jarrot continued to live in the old mansion with her children and her grand children until the flood of 1844. There had been many floods before. The record of their height may now be found marked on one of the rear doors of the church. When the Mississippi first began to rise in 1844, the inhabitants prepared for it. The Jarrots went out to the cabins after the negroes in skiffs. One frolicsome grand child, Marie Brackett dumped the cook in the water much to the latter's terror. The skiff was tied to the railing of the stairway when not in use. Some of the children learned to swim by being tied to these same banisters. The water finally got so high that everyone had to move to their second floors. To avoid the un-

healthy stages of receding water the Jarrots went to St. Louis where they remained for three months. Nothing could be locked, so as to prevent marauders from stealing the church vestments which were drying in the ballroom, a Catafalque with candles was set up to frighten away the superstitious. Nothing was taken.

Mme. Jarrot died in St. Louis in 1875 at the age of ninety-five. Ortance continued to live in the mansion until her death in 1886, when she was buried by the side of her family in the old church yard.

From available records the Jarrot mansion passed directly from the possession of the Jarrots to the possession of the Holy Family Church. The date of transfer is not recorded in available documents. At the present, grade school classes are held by the sisters of the Church, in the first floor West room and the ballroom on the second floor, where Samuel Davidson taught the children of Cahokia in the few years following 1809.

An old stone smoke house and a well (in use today) stand to the South of the mansion. An old cistern (now almost entirely filled with debris) is located at the North East corner of the building.

References: "Pioneer History" by Reynolds.

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